DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 433 CS 509 968

AUTHOR Coumbe, Matthew J.; Selinow, Timothy L.
TITLE Experiential Teacher as Ethicist: A Case Study in Teaching Research Methods.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (84th, New York, NY, November 21-24, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Experiential Learning; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Organizational Communication; *Qualitative Research; *Research Methodology; Student Projects; Team Teaching
IDENTIFIERS *Applied Communication; *Communication Ethics; North Dakota State University

ABSTRACT

The objective of a graduate course at North Dakota State University was to move students beyond a prescriptive approach for conducting qualitative research to a holistic consideration of the ethical dimensions involved in qualitative methods. Successive discussions allowed students the opportunity to fully consider ethics in a multi-faceted framework, rather than relegate ethics to a superimposed criterion. The team-taught graduate seminar focused on three elements: a survey of qualitative methods for analyzing organizational communication; an experiential learning project involving a communication audit at a large hospital; and a detailed discussion of ethical considerations in organizational communication. This multi-faceted approach enabled the teaching of methodologies in an applied dimension; the applied nature made ethics an integral component of the students' learning. A discussion of ethical concepts and issues was a major component of every class session. Students were required to discuss the ethics surrounding each decision they made when selecting and applying the research methods they used in the hospital audit. Students were asked to defend the ethics of their decisions in a final paper and two exams. Ultimately, the students were able to compose and present a detailed and conscientious communication to the senior management of the hospital. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 426 433

"Experiential Teacher as Ethicist: A Case Study in Teaching Research Methods"

Matthew J. Coumbe
North Dakota State University
coumbe@badlands.nodak.edu
&
Timothy L. Sellnow
North Dakota State University
sellnow@badlands.nodak.edu

Box 5075, University Station
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND 58105

Introduction

Our mission in this course was to move students beyond a prescriptive approach for conducting qualitative research to a holistic consideration of the ethical dimensions involved in qualitative methods. We enlarged the scope of the seminar to include continuous reflection of the ethical dimensions in an organizational communication audit. We included successive discussions of ethics in relation to research preparation, treatment of subjects, and reporting of data. These discussions allowed students the opportunity to fully consider ethics in a multi-faceted framework, rather than relegate ethics to a superimposed criterion.

Our goal was not only to place ethical considerations into the students' thoughts, but make the concept of ethics the underlying principle guiding the students' efforts in an experiential setting. Seminar objectives required students to construct logical arguments and to provide a rationale for the methodological objectives selected in the organizational audit. Pursuing this pedagogical focus propelled students to actually "do" ethics rather than merely "have" ethics (Postman, 1995).

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Coumbe
T. Sellnow
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Description of Project

In the spring of 1998, we team-taught a graduate seminar entitled "Qualitative Research Methods in Organizations." The course focused on three elements: a) a survey of qualitative methods for analyzing organizational communication; b) an experiential learning project involving a communication audit at a large hospital; c) a detailed discussion of ethical considerations in organizational communication. We chose this multi-faceted approach to the course because it enabled us to teach the methodologies in an applied dimension. The applied nature made ethics an integral component of the students' learning. A discussion of relevant ethical concepts and issues was a major component of every class session. Students were required to discuss the ethics surrounding each decision they made when selecting and applying the research methods they used in the hospital audit. Moreover, the students were asked to defend the ethics of their decisions in a final paper and on two exams. Ultimately, the students were able to compose and present a detailed and conscientious communication to the senior management of the hospital.

Objectives

The department of communication at North Dakota State University has established three general criteria for graduate students. In their written work, students are expected to meet the following objectives: a) students are able to generate an argument; b) students are able to provide examples cr data to support their claims; c) students will make accurate use of the theory or concept.

For our methods/ethics seminar, the these objectives were adapted as follows:

Objective I: Students will be able to generate an argument regarding use of methodology that includes relevant ethical considerations.

Objective II: Students will be able to provide examples from their experiential project, related to ethics and methodology, to support their claims.

Objective III: Students will be able to make accurate applications of concepts from ethics and methodological approaches when discussing the experiential project.

Outcomes

Our discussion of the course outcomes focuses on three perspectives: a) the student evaluations; b) instructors' evaluation of the students' work; and c) the hospital administration's assessment of the students' performance.

Student Evaluations

The student evaluations for the course were generally positive. A total of 13 students completed the course. In the area instruction, 12 of the 13 students rated the instruction as "good" or "very good." One student indicated that the instruction was in "between good and poor." All of the students indicated that the quality of the course was either "good" or "very good." Again, all of the students indicated that they ended the semester with a "good" or "very good" understanding of the courses content.

The students' open-ended responses also indicated that they were satisfied with the approach taken in class. Students were given an opportunity to write about what they felt went well in the class and what they felt needed improvement. Eleven of the students mentioned that the experiential learning opportunity made this course stand out among others as an opportunity to apply their knowledge. Several indicated that the course would enhance their career goals. Two students indicated that they were frustrated with the pace of the class. They felt the experiential project caused the class to move more slowly than they thought was appropriate. Six students mentioned that the ethics content made learning the methods more relevant to their daily lives. Only one student offered a negative reaction to the ethics content. That student indicated that s/he felt the ethics content did not fit her/his expectations for the course.

Instructors' Evaluation of Student Work

Course examinations asked the students to explain applications of each methodology while accounting for ethical issues. Students completed two examinations. The findings for each criteria are listed below:

Objective I (Argument): The first objective focused on the students' ability to write an argument that took both method and ethics into account. Our assessment indicated that all of the students were able to do so. The most common ethical consideration emphasized by our students focused on the stakeholder model of organizational ethics. Students were able to identify the ways in which their experience had an impact upon the diverse audience at the hospital.

The students focused on several other ethical perspectives as well. More than half of the students addressed the ethics associated with change. Since the hospital they studied was undergoing a reorganization, change was a relevant focus. The students were able to address a variety of ethical questions involving the changes they studied. A third of the students generated arguments focusing on ethical questions associated with the hospital's advertising. The students were able to assess the degree to which the organization's advertising represented the experiences of the employees.

Objective II (Examples): The second objective concentrated on the students' ability to provide examples addressing the ethical as well as methodological issues in their experience. The students' reflection on their project produced a variety of examples. Since the students were divided among five different components of the hospital, the examples varied widely. Still, the students were able to provide congruous ethical examples.

Although the students shared many examples from their specific areas of analysis, they were also able to relate them to the overall goal of the project. For example, one group of students analyzed the communication in the hospital's clinics. Another group analyzed communication among employees in the hospital's surgical wing. Both groups were able to frame their examples in terms of the

hospital's overall goal of conveying an image of a united system to the public.

Objective III (Accuracy: The third objective emphasized the degree to which students were able to make accurate use of ethical theories addressed in the class. Although all of the students were able to make accurate use of the theories, some were more sophisticated in their explanations than others. For example, all of the students were able to see the relevance of Stakeholder theory to the project. On the most basic level, students focused on the diverse factions of hospital employees. On a more complex level, for example, students were able to address the relevance of public relations to the hospital's multifaceted groups both inside and outside the hospital's boundaries. Ethical issues ranging from corporate ownership residing outside the state, reduced care options for local residents, and the option of unionizing nurses were addressed by half of the students. These issues were not mentioned by the remaining half of the students when they discussed the Stakeholder perspective--despite the discussion of these issues during debriefing sessions in the class.

Hospital Administration's Assessment

The students' communication audit project was coordinated within the hospital by the director of one its departments. This individual has an advanced degree in communication. Hence, this individual (the director) was able to evaluate the students' work on a sophisticated level. The director evaluated the students' audit according to its accuracy in the use of communication theory, the use of evidence to support the claims made, and the clarity and relevance of the conclusions provided. For all three criteria, the director was asked to also consider the students' ability to make appropriate consideration of the ethics surrounding the study.

Criteria I (Accuracy): The director indicated that the students exceeded her/his expectations for applying relevant theoretical concepts in the study. The director indicated that the students' use of methodology was appropriate from both procedural and ethical perspectives.

Criteria II (Evidence): The director complimented the students for the variety of examples they provided to support their claims. The director noted that the students included data and examples from all components of the organization. In doing so, the director said that the students were able to provide a balanced view of the organization. This balanced view resulted in a report that considered the needs of the many stakeholders involved in the study.

Criteria III (Conclusions): The director found that the conclusions and recommendations written by the students were practical. The director indicated that several of the recommendations were addressed by the hospital within days after the report received. As such, the students met the director's expectations for providing clear and relevant conclusions. Although the director did not specifically mention the ethical implications of the students' conclusions her response, she implied that the students met her expectations for being sensitive to ethical considerations when forming conclusions for a communication audit.

Conclusion

Our course objectives were successfully met as evidenced by the triangulation of evaluation material. For the most part, students were able to follow the course objectives we outlined prior to engaging in the organizational audit. Although some students displayed impatience with the pace of the material presented, most students were interested in the project and able to investigate and apply ethical considerations in a multi-faceted framework.

There are two clear issues for future instructors to consider based on our experience. One, the students in this experimental activity effectively brought ethics to the fore in their discussions, evaluations, and research methodologies. Secondly, and as a result of these outcomes, there is clear opportunity to weave ethical considerations into the students' ideological fabric through experiential learning.

Recommendations

1. Instructors should strongly consider providing some form of applied experience for students to enact the ethical considerations they are constructing in their own ideological framework. Because of the situational nature of ethics, the instructor must prepare to deliver frequent feedback and direction to student responses and questions. Requiring continued rationalization by students will begin to move ethics from a post hoc consideration to a driving ideological presence.

2. Instructors need to enlarge the discussion of ethics beyond a black and white description of acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors that guide research activity. It is imperative, in the consideration of ethics, for the researcher to engage in a full consideration of individual values, social values, Stakeholder values, and organizational values (Seeger, 1997).

3. When designing their courses, instructors are advised to carefully consider the timing of the discussions in relation to the applied experience. When dealing with human subjects, it is crucial to introduce students to ethical considerations before the project begins, rather than facilitating an on-going or retrospective pedagogical format.

References

Postman, N. (1995). The end of education. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Seeger, M. (1997). Ethics and organizational communication. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc.